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Richard Hell, *Genesis : Grasp*, and the Blank
Generation: From Poetry to Punk in New
York's Lower East Side

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As we read through various interviews with punk rock icon Richard Hell and Hell's own published work as a poet and novelist, we might very well be struck by the way writers including Gérard de Nerval, Arthur Rimbaud, Antonin Artaud, Dylan Thomas, and Ted Berrigan appear alongside references to 1960s garage bands like the Count Five or proto-punk groups like the New York Dolls. Such diversity of reference suggests that there might be a connection between Hell's roles in the late sixties and early seventies as a small-magazine publisher and poet and his later contribution to punk in New York, despite Hell's refusal at times to conflate two ostensibly generically distinct art forms.¹ As I will argue

The unpublished works of Richard Meyers and Richard Hell are quoted here by permission of Richard Hell.

1. As others have noted, Hell "positioned himself on the art/pop boundary. Hell stressed the influence on him 'by the twisted French aestheticism of the late 19th century like Rimbaud, Verlaine, Huysmans, Baudelaire.' He even gave an artistic spin to his torn shirt and cropped hair look, soon to be imported to England as the emblem of punk. 'There were some artists that I admired who looked like that. Rimbaud looked like that. Artaud looked like that. And it also looked like the kid in *400 Blows*, the Truffaut movie'" (Hell qtd. in Gendron 252–53). At the same time, Hell has insisted that in the early to mid 1970s, he "was a guy with a vision of ideas and intentions for music. At that time I just had a hard time getting what I wanted in sound. What I've done isn't about my lyrics—there's never been a rock 'n' roll song that survived on the strength of its lyrics. People give me this same shit about my books, going the opposite direction. That I'm a musician who writes. Fuck that. Also, the way I write songs is to write the music first, and then I listen to the music and see what it makes me think, and write the words to it" (Hell qtd. in Christgau and Dibbell 6).

here, Hell can be credited in part for imbuing punk rock with a markedly literary aura that has informed histories of the music from Greil Marcus's *Lipstick Traces: A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (1989), to Legs McNeil's and Gillian McCain's *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk* (1996), to Bernard Gendron's *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club: Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (2002).² I want to read that aura around the music as one which inevitably complicates any attempts to mark clear divisions between a poem on the page and a performed song, between club space and poetry-reading space, between "high art" and the mass market.³

What, after all, were New York's musical and literary avant-gardes doing in terms of negotiating the spaces between the underground and the purported mainstream? Poets of the 1960s and 1970s valued and romanticized an underground economy based in part on decentralized production and distribution. Recalling the "mimeograph revolution" that found writers including Amiri Baraka, Diane di Prima, and Ed Sanders publishing their and their friends' work in any number of cheaply produced, hand-stapled journals, poet Anne Waldman (herself an editor of a number of mimeos including *The World*, a journal attached to the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church) enthused, "We were already drawn to underground 'autonomous zones,' tender beauties of small press production" (xxi). Waldman highlights the "modest" production values of the magazine and points more generally to values attendant on the mimeograph revolution, such as autonomy, low cost, marginalization in the "underground," and independence from the constraints of the traditional publishing and bookstore industries. Comments like Waldman's suggest that the poetry scene at the time was at least

2. I consider Hell to be part of a literary constellation of punk provocateurs including Ed Sanders, Lou Reed, Patti Smith, David Thomas, and Lydia Lunch.

3. In this article I want to emphasize the *literary* aspects of that aura around New York punk in the early 1970s. This is not to say that other purportedly "high art" forms did not have a role in lending New York punk a kind of high aesthetic sheen as, correspondingly, punk was able to cede a kind of "street" credibility to the burgeoning gallery scene in New York's Tribeca neighborhood. See Gendron, chapter 12, for an excellent analysis of the ways late punk and "no wave" music intersected with New York's visual arts cultures.

attempting to inscribe itself as “a self-consciously avant-garde project, a quasi-Marxist utopia where the cultural workers [were] in control of the forms of production” (Kane 347).

Thus any number of poets not willing to wait around to be published by the likes of *The Kenyon Review* or *The New Yorker* simply started their own presses using cheap and widely available mimeograph and tabletop offset printing presses. Mailing lists of friends, friends of friends, and favored artists made up these poets’ audiences, supplemented by the multitude of poetry performances taking place in coffee shops, including Les Deux Mégots, Le Metro, and the Poetry Project at St. Mark’s Church. The poet Ted Berrigan summarized this “do it yourself” approach to publication and distribution with singular whimsy. Describing his own mimeographed publishing venture, *C magazine*, and his efforts to publish poets Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, James Schuyler, and Kenneth Koch in it, Berrigan asserted:

[T]here were these four people, and when I first came to New York . . . from Oklahoma . . . I was very interested in these four people. . . . There weren’t many people that were interested in those four people. . . . so I got very interested in them. They seemed to me to open up a lot of possibilities. Then someone asked me if I wanted to edit a magazine. So I said, “Sure!” My plan for that magazine was to publish these four people in conjunction with four or five younger people, myself and people that I knew. . . . And I put them in, too. And then I realized that there was such a thing as New York School, because there was a second generation. So in essence, *we* were the New York School because these guys, although they were the real New York School, weren’t doing anything about it, and we were. And that struck me as very funny. . . . I used to tell people they could join for five dollars.

(90–91)

The New York school is not, in this telling, a taxonomical term bestowed on poets by institutionally backed academics and their affiliated, institutionally funded publications. Rather, poets themselves are in this case scheming to determine the grounds of their reception and mark the boundaries and affiliated aesthetics of their self-designation.

The forms of distribution for New York’s proto-punk scene evoked those of the D.I.Y. poetry community. Patti Smith’s ver-

sion of Jimi Hendrix's "Hey Joe" and her performance poem "Piss Factory" were first released as a single in 1974 by Mer Records; Richard Hell's punk anthem "Blank Generation," alongside his "Another World" and "You Gotta Lose," was released as a single in 1976 on Ork Records. Both labels were very much in the spirit of the poetry underground. In Smith's case, Mer Records was set up entirely by herself and her friend Robert Mapplethorpe to release her work. Distribution, such as it was, was predicated on a network of sympathetic record stores contacted directly by Smith and her peers, then supplemented by word-of-mouth and sales of the single at shows. Ork Records, run by Television manager Terry Ork, similarly committed itself to a localized network of musicians, friends, and fans for funding and distribution. Independent record stores like Bleeker Bob's and Colony Records became the new go-to places for the latest manifestation of New York's avant-garde. Wilson Smith writes: "Behind that counter [at Colony Records] in the back they had pinned to the wall lots of picture sleeve 45s, and mixed in with a bunch of crud was a growing number of records that you simply *didn't find* in any other record store that you knew about. You were like, 'What *is* that stuff? Are those real records?' You'd squint at them across the counter and try to figure out what the deal was. 'Ork Records?' What the heck was that?" (178).

And yet the poetry and punk scenes of the 1960s and 1970s were not opposed to the lure of exiting the underground to join the big guns at commercially viable publishing and recording industries. While ideology encouraged musicians and writers to control the means of production on a grassroots level, practicality played a part in this economy as well. Downtown proto-punk musicians recognized that they "had little chance of being signed to a major label," as "there were few true independent labels in business," so "friends, fans, and band members began recording and releasing records on their own," in the words of Sharon Hannon (27). For both poets and musicians, participating in a self-styled "underground" did not preclude involvement in mainstream publishing and recording industries. Rather, entering the mainstream was reframed variously as funny accident,

invasion, and/or contamination, rather than as uncritical participation and absorption. In 1969 and 1970, for example, poets Tom Clark, Clark Coolidge, Dick Gallup, and Lewis MacAdams had their books published by Harper & Row. But this development was in no way a harbinger of the downtown scene's being folded discreetly and safely into a publishing industry divorced from the intimate ties to locality and community that were so important to the New York poets. Ron Padgett, accustomed at the time to being published in mimeograph magazines, went so far as to remove a manuscript accepted by Harper & Row because he wasn't pleased with the terms of the contract on offer, while Clark, Coolidge, Gallup, and MacAdams merrily adhered to their original values of small-scale publication by continuing to release work through the tiny imprints they and their friends had set up.

For punk musicians, it was perhaps a bit trickier to administer the boundaries between mainstream culture and the underground. Lenny Kaye, guitarist for the Patti Smith Group, anticipated the paradox of antiestablishment caterwaulers simultaneously blurring the boundaries between poetry and pop and signing on to major labels by insisting on the music's ability to transcend traditional binaries:

Rock could be Art (as opposed to "craft"), but that didn't mean it had to take on the trappings of moral responsibility. Actually, quite the opposite was true. Art-rat: the more contradictions the better

The bands weren't really alike. There was a self-awareness to their work that spoke of some knowledge of conceptual art—these weren't culturati babes-in-the-woods, despite Johnny's and Joey's and Dee Dee's and Tommy's matching leather jackets. Tom Verlaine once said that each grouping was like a separate idea, inhabiting [*sic*] their own world and reference points.

The story of Seymour Stein's Sire Records label is a case in point illustrating punk's shifting place within the spectrum of privileged art form and mass culture and, correspondingly, punk's negotiation of "independent" and major labels. Stein signed the Ramones on to his then-fledgling label, and their debut album became a critical success albeit not an all-out commercial smash.

When Warner Bros. Records approached him for a distribution deal, Stein ensured that his roster of bands—including the Ramones and the Talking Heads—retained a great deal of creative control over what they produced. What followed was the unlikely scenario of some very challenging records gaining mass-market circulation. The year 1977 alone saw albums including the Talking Heads' '77, Richard Hell & the Voidoids' *Blank Generation*, the Ramones' *Rocket to Russia*, the Dead Boys' *Young Loud and Snotty*, and a re-released seven-inch single of Patti Smith's performance poem "Piss Factory" and "Hey Joe" unleashed on the public. That songs like the Dead Boys' "Caught with the Meat in Your Mouth" and the Ramones' "Cretin Hop" and "Teenage Lobotomy" were distributed suggests Stein's openness to disseminating an aggressive and at the time somewhat "obscene" aesthetic to Middle America. Combined with that effort to push the boundaries of taste was the promotion of the quirky, spare, and self-consciously "arty" music and poetry typical of Patti Smith, the Talking Heads, and their ilk. Stein was staging a three-pronged attack using relatively foul content (Ramones, Dead Boys), outré sounds (Talking Heads), and texts that threatened the generic boundaries dividing poetry from music (Patti Smith) to intervene in an increasingly album-oriented, soft-rock pop-music culture.

In a 1978 *Billboard* article, Roman Kozak suggested that, far from being domesticated, punk bands actually altered the functions and power of the major labels. Pointing out that "[j]ust about every record company now has its new wave band," Kozak nevertheless insisted: "Let it be said right from the beginning that punk rock is not a plot by the record companies to foist shoddily recorded, inept and crude rock 'n' roll upon an unsuspecting public. The kids are doing it all by themselves. Slowly, surely and inexorably punk rock . . . is growing like a disease" (49). In an article titled "Assault on the Industry!" Stein himself insisted that the new sounds were going to alter the industry, not the other way around. "With greater exposure will come acceptance of the new wave for what it truly is, a renewal of the freshness, audience involvement and awareness of roots that have always been among rock 'n' roll's greatest virtues" (49). The

boundary lines between trash and art, the underground and the mainstream, poetry and punk were becoming increasingly blurred by 1977, as the culture around independent labels and radical artistic communities informed—if temporarily—the conventional recording and publishing industries.⁴

Richard Hell is a particularly interesting figure to consider in light of both the poets' and punks' engagement with and interrogation of underground and mainstream economies and their attendant aesthetics. Hell's punk posture was informed to some extent by his literary imagination and immersion in avant-garde traditions (particularly those associated with French symbolism, surrealism, and his own contemporary New York scene). This material engagement in poetic praxis, combined with Hell's subsequent musical output and the discourse that developed around him as it was promulgated by the music press at the time, helped mark early American punk rock as iconoclastically erudite, anti-academic, and fundamentally populist.

Beloved by Hell, many East Village-based poets—including Ted Berrigan, Tom Clark, and Anne Waldman—referenced rock music in their poems to foreground class affiliations and aesthetic tastes that distinguished them from their more conventionally

4. There's a real danger here of my romanticizing the ability of punk bands to alter if not redeem the worst tendencies of mainstream record labels. Many in New York's punk community did accuse bands that joined the majors of "selling out." As early as 1977, John Holmstrom, editor of *Punk* magazine, railed "C.B.G.B + THE NEW YORK 'UNDERGROUND' ROCK SCENE IS IN ITS DEATH THROES. THE RAMONES FIND A DISCO-SHIT PRODUCER FOR THEIR NEXT RECORD. THE DICTATORS USE FIRE-BOMBS AND SMOKE MACHINES IN AN ATTEMPT BEAT KISS [sic]. PATTI SMITH BECOMES SELF-INDULGENT A/LA LED ZEPPELIN. A MILLION NEWSPAPERS AND MAGAZINES, MISSING THE POINT, WRITE ABOUT PUNK-ROCK—A JOKE FABRICATED BY THE NOT TOO BRIGHT BUT WELL INTENTIONED EDITORS OF A SLEAZY RAG. MONEY REARS ITS UGLY HEAD. ART BECOMES PRODUCT. LIFE GOES TO THE MOVIES. WE WON'T GET FOOLED AGAIN." All that said, within the same screed, Holmstrom slyly added, "THERE'S NOTHING LEFT TO BELIEVE IN. THERE NEVER WAS. STOP READING THIS" (Holmstrom, "Meaningless" 2). So what *should* we believe? Given the often mercurial relationships between punk bands and their major label patrons, as well as the fact that few North American bands that signed on to the majors domesticated their sound in an effort to reach a wider audience, my sense is that the relationship between the punk underground and the mainstream skewed toward the underground's affecting its purported overlords. The Ramones barely changed their sound, no matter what label they were on.

urbane predecessors.⁵ Assisted in part by the countercultural sheen of sixties rock and late-night, animated readings in downtown alternative spaces like the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church in New York's East Village, the downtown New York poetry scene generated outlaw and group significations which influenced performance culture in New York throughout the 1960s and 1970s. Links developed between writers and proto-punk groups such as poet Ed Sanders's band the Fugs that resulted in a remarkable artistic cross-fertilization that blossomed in the 1970s punk and no-wave scenes. As Gendron notes, "Operating out of the bohemia of the East Village, the bands—the Talking Heads, Television, Devo, the B-52s, even the Ramones—took on a distinctly postmodern art posture, displaying irony, pastiche, eclecticism, and a fascination with the kitsch and garish mass culture of the past . . . rock artists exhibited in art shows and did poetry readings" (7).

In a draft statement for the Poetry Project at St. Mark's anthology *Out of This World*, Hell recalls his arrival in New York, emphasizing his efforts to become not a musician but a writer, and highlighting the mimeograph and small-journal publications he was drawn to:

I was only 17 when I came to New York to be a writer. I was some kind of hayseed. I wanted to know where the poets were, and I guess I looked in most all the wrong places before finally I found the Poetry Project. I got a big crush on Bernadette Mayer right away but I was still too shy to introduce myself to anyone. I liked to buy "The World" and "Angel Hair." Ted Berrigan and Ron Padgett and Tom Veitch knocked me out.

(Draft)

Rock critics Robert Christgau and Carola Dibbell frame Hell's arrival in New York as the beginning of a kind of *Bildungsroman* tracking the natural development of a young protagonist from wide-eyed poet to visionary punk:

Hell came to New York to be a poet and was running a tiny press as a teenager before he and Tom Verlaine persuaded Hilly Kristal to mount

5. For a wider consideration of the ways second-generation New York school writers referenced rock music in their poetry, see Kane 352–63.

their music on Sundays at CBGB, thereby kicking off the punk era. That band was Television, which Hell would leave after a year—in 1975—to form The Heartbreakers with ex-New York Dolls Johnny Thunders and Jerry Nolan, and then, in 1976, The Voidoids with Robert Quine, Ivan Julian, and Marc Bell. The Voidoids put out *Blank Generation* in 1977 and (without Julian and Bell) *Destiny Street* in 1982. Ten years later Hell collaborated on *Dim Stars*, adding Thurston Moore to his cavalcade of guitar geniuses.

Let us follow this chronology, then, and look to Hell's arrival in New York in the late 1960s where he quickly joined the ranks of small-magazine publishers in the Lower East Side by starting up a journal that he and his co-editor, David Giannini, christened *Genesis : Grasp*.

The two young poets published the journal for three years, beginning in 1968, producing six issues. During this period Hell was still going by his birth name, Richard Meyers. One of his first jobs was working as a clerk at the Gotham Book Mart on Forty-seventh Street, between Fifth and Sixth Avenues, which he'd walk to from his apartment on Sixth Street off Second Avenue in the East Village ("Autobiography"). It was at the Gotham where he developed a love for the small-circulation magazines affiliated with modernism as they stretched into the New American poetry of the 1950s and 1960s:

I had the luck to get assigned to helping catalog the hundreds and hundreds of old little literary magazines filling up a storage room on the second floor. I spent day after day alone up there with such signifying artifacts as Eliot's *Criterion*, Harriet Monroe's *Poetry* (Chicago) when it was publishing Pound's circle in the teens and twenties, Eugene and Marie Jolas's *Paris Transition*, where a lot of early modernists and surrealists published, Princess Caetani's *Botteghe Oscure*, a gorgeous high-toned bohemian thing from Rome, Wyndham Lewis's *Blast*, Margaret Anderson's *The Little Review*, Charles Henri Ford's *View* (where all the temporarily New York European Dada/Surrealists like Breton and Man Ray and Max Ernst published), Ashbery's and Koch's and Schuyler's and Mathews's *Locus Solus*, Diane Di Prima's and LeRoi Jones's *The Floating Bear* . . . Elegant stacks of timeless high design in letterpress on laid rag, to exclamatory spectra of lithography and free-form poetry on yellowing tabloid newsprint, to utilitarian spontaneous stapled mimeo zines with

the cancelled postage stamps pasted, and handwritten addresses of underground writers scrawled across them.

(“Autobiography”)

Many of the journals Hell names are now recognized as vital little magazines devoted to publishing new and experimental work. The trajectory from early modernist magazines like *transition* to something like Henri Ford’s *View* and onwards to Harry Mathews and Ashbery’s *Locus Solus* was based not simply on shared literary affinities but on social networks that found “elders” like Ford passing on the modernist baton to younger colleagues, who would then publish in a similar avant-gardist spirit that was materially independent of what Hell implies were less desirable academic alternatives. Indeed, most of the magazines Hell mentions are significant not just for their literary content but for social values defined by anti-authoritarianism, localism, independence from institutional rules, and a D.I.Y. ethos that found visionary publishers putting together what little resources they had to produce material ranging from the “elegant” to hand-stapled, willfully sloppy collections designed for an intended community as opposed to an abstracted “general public.” In his autobiography, Hell highlights Ted Berrigan’s *C* magazine as the zenith of small-press publishing: “My very favorite example, . . . and which I rate the greatest literary magazine of the whole 20th century, was a cumbersome, shoddily slapped together, stapled mimeo on legal-sized paper, published on the Lower East Side, 1963–1966, called *C* magazine, edited by Ted Berrigan. You could extrapolate everything of interest in the universe from an examination of its thirteen issues.”

Hell’s identifying *C* as the greatest magazine of the twentieth century is interesting given its “slapped together” appearance—cranked out of a primitive press on cheap paper and stapled. As his favorite poetry magazine was “shoddy,” so Hell would go on to project himself in the bands the Neon Boys, Television, the Heartbreakers, and Richard Hell & the Voidoids, through what would soon be known as punk style—torn T-shirts, spiky hair, and so on. For a brief moment, this “look”—at least before it was co-opted by English punk and incorporated into high and ready-to-wear fashion via Zandra Rhodes and others—stood as a clear

sign of the bearer's resistance to the economies of capital. *Looking* this way wasn't going to get one a job, even as the look simultaneously served as a coterie signal linking one with like-minded disaffiliates.

Independence was the crucial value emanating out of this look, and it manifested itself materially in early New York punk's initial practice of recording on independent labels. The D.I.Y. aesthetic, replete with its own anti-establishment "look," was at the core of the punk value system. As John Holmstrom, editor of New York's *Punk* magazine put it in an editorial arguing for his definition of the word, a punk "WAS 'A BEGINNER AN INEXPERIENCED HAND.' PUNK ROCK—ANY KID CAN PICK UP A GUITAR AND BECOME A ROCK'N'ROLL STAR, DESPITE OR BECAUSE OF HIS LACK OF ABILITY, TALENT, INTELLIGENCE, LIMITATIONS AND/OR POTENTIAL" (6). Berrigan's *C* and related journals, as some of the more charming examples of little magazines that embraced a community-oriented, D.I.Y. approach to publishing, were for Hell literarily inflected punk signs that would be adapted productively in (then) Richard Meyers's work as a publisher of *Genesis : Grasp* and later publishing projects, and in Richard Hell's role as singer in a rock 'n' roll band.

The first issue of *Genesis : Grasp* was published when Hell was just eighteen years old and featured a fairly motley crew of contributors. The issue included poems by the English novelist and poet Sylvia Townsend Warner; Hell's associate David Giannini; the Trappist monk, poet, and activist Thomas Merton; Richard Meyers (Hell); Goerge Wagner (his first name is spelled "Goerge" throughout the issue); a little-known New York poet named William Leo Coakley; the Pulitzer Prize-winning, mainstream American poet Richard Eberhart; and the downtown-affiliated poet Yuki Hartman. The magazine had yet to find its legs. It initially lacked the coherent set of poetic-aesthetic approaches typical of the magazines the young Hell was beginning to love in his job as clerk at the Gotham. "A lot of the content of those early issues of G:G was pretty random," Hell recalls. "We took a shotgun approach regarding soliciting work from established writers. If we'd seen a single piece we liked by anyone we'd be liable to write them at their publisher . . . the only issues of that

magazine that I can stand to look at are the final two (#s 4 & 5–6) and even they still make me cringe in places” (E-mail).

Despite Hell’s retrospective embarrassment, there are signs even within the early issues of a kind of avant-garde commitment to challenging the distinctions between art and life that would find full flower in the later issues and, most spectacularly, in Hell’s music career. A “manifesto” included in the first number of *Genesis : Grasp* states this challenge pretty clearly: “Of course, there is no art, only life. In the practical sense that nothing a living being can produce or imagine can transcend his being alive. But, art is entirely impractical, and transcendence is exactly what it attempts” (Hell and Giannini 3). The kind of language Hell uses here was very much in the air at the time and would feed directly into other punk icons’ efforts to create the kind of joyful and desperate noise that would allow them to glimpse what it might be like to “transcend” the loathed world of bourgeois rationality in order to discover a nameless, indefinable “outside” that had as its driving force an urge toward disorder.

The first issues of *Genesis : Grasp* were produced during a period in musical history when the distinctions between innovative poetry and rock were becoming increasingly blurred as musicians created musical spectacles in a roughly theorized, Dionysian effort to (as Jim Morrison put it) “break on through to the other side.” Music historians Simon Frith and Howard Horne write, “Even Iggy Pop, mid-Western, uncultivated trailer-camp boy, became an ‘arty’ rock musician, thanks to his friendship with Anne Wehrer, the dynamo at the heart of the Ann Arbor experimental theatre/music/film/Factory scene” (113). One can refer back to a number of musicians—Lou Reed of the Velvet Underground, Jim Morrison of the Doors, Ed Sanders of the Fugs—who summoned the bad boys of poetry (respectively, Delmore Schwartz, Rimbaud, and in Sanders’s case, poets ranging from William Blake and Algernon Charles Swinburne to Allen Ginsberg) in order to justify their then-shocking tendencies to write lyrics and make sounds that renounced logic. These musicians’ propensity for using howls, shouts, whines, and roars—noise, really, albeit an ecstatic and at times terrifying noise—made previously illogical songs like Sam the Sham and

the Pharaohs' "Wooly Bully" or Little Richard's Dadaist ejaculation "a whop bop a loo bop a whop bam boom" seem positively tame by comparison. This is especially so when we consider the negativity underlying late-sixties performers' works in comparison to the far more celebratory use of nonsense typical of fifties rock 'n' roll. A 1967 *Time* magazine feature on Jim Morrison pointed to the destructive impulse behind some of the more ambitious music of the decade. Morrison was quoted opining: "I'm interested in anything about revolt, disorder, chaos, especially activity that has no meaning. It seems to me to be the road to freedom" ("Pop Music"). Wallace Fowlie rightly argues that Morrison drew here on the "words of Rimbaud, Artaud (*Theater of Cruelty*), and possibly Lautréamont" (78). As we will see, Rimbaud, Artaud, and Comte de Lautréamont, among others, appear overtly throughout Hell's work in poetry and, albeit more discreetly, in his rock 'n' roll lyrics as well.

One might agree with Hell's negative take on the first two issues of *Genesis : Grasp* (volumes 1.1 [1968] and 1.2 [1969]), but his self-deprecation is perhaps not so necessary when it comes to volume 1.3 (1969). With its spare cover composed of five delicate lines arranged abstractly around the top of two longer, gently arced lines, by California-based artist Nicol Allan, the issue coheres around a vibrant blend of symbolist and surrealist poetry, modernist and postmodern art, and the collaborative, mischievous, and pseudonymous writing typical of second-generation New York school poets. This kind of aesthetic was on show most interestingly in the final two issues, though it is worth seeing how it got started by taking a look at *Genesis : Grasp* 1.3.

Included in the magazine was a manifesto by poet and Bates College professor John Tagliabue, a poem by surrealist Andre Pieyre De Mandiargues, poems by Yuki Hartman, paintings by Jordan Davies, Charles Baudelaire's "Le Gouffre" (translated by Sylvia Townsend Warner), poems by British modernist writer Valentine Ackland, a reproduction of a Claes Oldenburg pen and ink drawing entitled *Man and Woman Talking* (1960), fiction by Robert Cordier and Henry H. Roth, and poetry by Richard Meyers (Hell). Hell also makes an early pseudonymous appearance

as one “Ernest Stomach,” in this case reviewing William Saroyan’s *I Used to Believe I Had Forever, Now I’m Not So Sure* by, in part, contrasting Saroyan with Gertrude Stein. Included in the issue is an essay entitled “Antilove and the Supraconscious” by Hell and his then best friend Tom Miller. Miller would later become better known as Tom Verlaine, singer and guitarist for the rock band Television.

Baudelaire’s appearance in the journal marks an early if vaguely defined affiliation between French symbolist poetry and a nascent punk attitude valuing a complex blend of intensity, innocence, and existential nausea. Warner’s translation of Baudelaire’s “Le gouffre” from *Les fleurs du mal* can be seen as one among a number of signs pointing the way forward to the visual and verbal nihilism and play typical of the group that would come to be known as Richard Hell & the Voidoids:

Pascal had his abyss, opening at his feet
 Whichever way he turned. Do, think, desire, that pit
 Lies under all. Witness my hairs, time and again
 Raised on my scalp because the wind of Fear went by.

Above, below, around . . . the fathomless, the stretch
 Of barren shore, silence, space that lures and appals [*sic*].
 On the dark background of my nights, God with skilled hand
 Paints an implacable, ever-changing nightmare.

I dread to fall asleep as one dreads a cavern
 Thronged with nameless fears and leading—to what? I see
 Only infinity from every window,

And my soul, driven on from one brink to another,
 Envis the Uncreate’s insensibility.
 —Oh! stay within the bounds of number and person!

(20)

I would argue, if tentatively, that there is a vague but interesting correspondence between Baudelaire’s “The Abyss” and the future Richard Hell’s overall “look” in the various bands he participated in during the 1970s. This is not to say that Hell thought to himself, one fine summer’s day, that Baudelaire’s poem

should in some way determine the name of his own group (with “void” as a synonym for “abyss”). Rather, I want to suggest that abstract conceptions of existential despair and emptiness, combined with the latent gloomy visuality (generated by such words and phrases as “abyss,” “the pit,” “fathomless,” “dark background of my nights”) informing Baudelaire’s poem can be tracked more generally from French symbolist poetry to New York punk. We might dare to go even further here and suggest that Richard Hell’s punk haircut inadvertently but compellingly resonates with Baudelaire’s poem. In “The Abyss” we find the frightened, bitter speaker describing “my hairs, time and again / Raised on my scalp because the wind of Fear went by.” The speaker in Baudelaire’s abyss, motivated as he is by the realization that there is no transcendent truth, no foundational meaning, no sensate God, is writing to us with his hair standing on end. Indeed, alternative translations emphasize the practically cartoonlike image of the speaker’s spiky hair. William Aggeler’s 1954 version, for example, reads, “and over my hair which stands on end / I feel the wind of Fear pass frequently.” Similarly, Roy Campbell’s 1952 translation shocks with “And often by the wind of terror stirred / I’ve felt the hair shoot upright on my head.”

It is not out of the realm of possibility that poems like Baudelaire’s “The Abyss” provided part of the backstory that led to the spiked haircuts and ripped clothes we associate with the look Hell initiated around 1974. As Dylan Jones, Lauraine Leblanc, and other historians of punk style have noted, Johnny Rotten purportedly designed his trademark shocked-hair look by copying a photograph of Richard Hell given to him by Sex Pistols manager Malcolm McLaren. McLaren himself recalls:

Richard Hell was a definite, 100 percent inspiration, and, in fact, I remember telling the Sex Pistols, “Write a song like ‘Blank Generation,’ but write your own bloody version,” and their own version was “Pretty Vacant” . . . I came back to England determined. I had these images I came back with, it was like Marco Polo, or Walter Raleigh. These are the things I brought back: the image of this distressed, strange thing called Richard Hell. And this phrase, “the blank generation.”

(qtd. in McNeil and McCain 199)

Hell himself said: "We wore ripped-up clothes because we wanted our insides to be outside. . . . The whole intention was to deliver your core self without any filters. The final idea was, 'I don't care'" (qtd. in Hochswender). The punk look is not just a sign of aggression but a visible acknowledgment that the world one lives in is terrifying and strange. Rereading Hell's spiky shards of hair through Baudelaire's "abyss," we can understand that part of what initiated Hell's style was an effort to signify both aggression and, as Baudelaire would have it, fear and despair. After all, in the late 1960s and the 1970s, the municipal and federal governments had essentially given up on neighborhoods like the East Village, leaving the area to fester in the hands of drug dealers, absentee landlords, arsonists, and worse.⁶ As Alan Vega of the band Suicide characterized it in 1976: "New York is the grandest shit scene of all time. It's like the Titanic a thousand times over; just sinking away but it's beautiful" (qtd. in Persky, "Suicide" 33). Rock journalist Lisa Persky described the neighborhood as "loathsome and desperate territory" that nevertheless "harboured great artists and their work" ("Are the Ramones" 28). The origins of the punk look, then, did not just emanate out of a vaguely defined "rage" and rough-hewed libertarian and nihilist politics but rather were informed in part by a complex negotiation between the dark, neo-Gothic rhetoric of French symbolism and the material dissolution of a heavily romanticized Lower East Side and East Village.

If Baudelaire's "The Abyss" might have played a small role in the look Hell developed around 1973 when his music career was beginning to take off, we should certainly add the images of Artaud and Rimbaud that he included on the cover of the final issue of *Genesis : Grasp*: both poets' hair styles are remarkably

6. By 1979, the neighborhood was regularly described in apocalyptic terms. In an article published in *The East Village Eye*, Lisa Zinna described "a bright Thursday morning on Avenue B," emphasizing "rubble-strewn lots" and "empty shells of burnt out tenement buildings": "In some, brick walls are peeled away, revealing the blackened interiors that are now filled with rotting garbage and piles of debris. Block after block, from 14th Street to Houston Street, from Avenue A to Avenue D, one can see, smell, and feel the devastation of the neighborhood. Many of the residents are gone now. Some remain, though, trying to hold on to the homes that have not yet burned. Others will burn their buildings down themselves so that they will be moved out of the area by the City" (3).

like Hell's own in the 1970s. Additionally, Pablo Picasso's famous sketch of Arthur Rimbaud was used as the cover for Wallace Fowlie's widely distributed 1966 edition of Rimbaud's work. As Fowlie described the image (ending with a reference to a T-shirt that quoted punk icon Patti Smith's song "Land" in its use of the phrase "Go Rimbaud"):

Picasso's Rimbaud is a more vigorous-looking youth, and his hair was changed into the punk style of today. . . . The University of Chicago Press was delighted to use it for the cover of my book. This was the first commercial use of the drawing. Later, it was reproduced on T-shirts: Picasso's portrait covering the chest of the wearer, and at the top of the shirt the words GO, RIMBAUD.

(14)

Baudelaire, Rimbaud, and the whole pantheon of French symbolist writing generally was to play a significant role in Hell's self-fashioning. Hell insisted in 2008:

The connection between the whole world of values of rock n' roll and the world of values of poetry in the Rimbaud/Lautreamont/Baudelaire world . . . there are definitely connections. The thing that made me pick poetry as a way of life when I was at school . . . it could just as easily have been rock n' roll and I don't know what else it could have just as easily been because it was the same idea. It was rejecting the values of straight society and looking for this kind of just level of intensity.

(Personal interview)

Hell emphasizes the almost arbitrary way in which the self is constituted as invention (one can "pick" poetry or art "as a way of life" as opposed to understanding the "self" as some kind of innate, natural phenomenon). The young Richard Meyers, on the cusp of anointing himself "Richard Hell," is visible within the pages of *Genesis : Grasp* as an editor seeking a level of intensity that ultimately transforms life into a kind of performance art. Baudelaire's poetry became part of a method that Hell incorporated into his developing style.⁷

7. Dada, of course, has been linked by Greil Marcus, Jon Savage, and others as a precursor to punk. While this is certainly a compelling point to make, such a move tends to overshadow the role that French symbolist poetry played in the imaginations of nascent punks like Hell. As Bernard Gendron suggests, French symbolist poetry as a

Michel Foucault's definition of Baudelaire's modernity applies to Hell's brand of punk as one informed by the iconography of Baudelaire's *dandysme*. The dandy displays the self as a structured act which significantly includes a publicly performed resistance to absorption in normative community:

[M]odernity for Baudelaire is not simply a form of relationship to the present; it is also a mode of relationship that has to be established with oneself. The deliberate attitude of modernity is tied to an indispensable asceticism. To be modern is not to accept oneself as one is in the flux of the passing moments; it is to take oneself as object of a complex and difficult elaboration: what Baudelaire, in the vocabulary of his day, calls *dandysme* . . . Modern man, for Baudelaire, is not the man who goes off to discover himself, his secrets and his hidden truth; he is the man who tries to invent himself. This modernity does not "liberate man in his own being"; it compels him to face the task of producing himself.

(41-42)

Baudelaire is modern precisely through his rejection of the natural, that is, the discourses of depth associated with language such as "discover," "secrets," and "hidden truth." The act of self-invention ("producing himself") is, in this sense, a potentially oppositional act. The self-conscious production of the dandy's public display takes as its starting point a rejection of those roles we associate with the purportedly "natural" heterosexual matrix through which queerness is always and forever "deviant." The dandy, like the punk, *sticks out* in his display of the self as one that can be altered, ripped apart, refigured, reimagined. This notion may also help to explain the affiliations between glam-rock and punk. At first glance, the feminized drag glamour and cabaret shenanigans that we associate with bands like the New York Dolls or T. Rex might seem worlds apart from the snarling, spit-soaked near-nihilism of punk.⁸ However, looking at these two musical movements in light of the dissident sensibility of

"discourse" anticipated the nihilist and decadent signs circulating around the production and dissemination of a punk aesthetic (65).

8. See John Holmstrom, Roberta Bayley, and Legs McNeil's interview with David Johansen of the New York Dolls for a lively discussion of how mid-seventies punks understood the "punk" significations of glam rock.

Baudelaire's dandy goes a long way in explaining why so many punks looked back on glam as a formative influence in their own self-fashioning.

Tearing a symbolic and material rip in the social fabric through radical fashion practice, the dandy/punk uses appearance in order to draw attention to himself as a subject circulating freely within and outside of dominant social codes and to interrupt, if slightly and evanescently, the flow of public order. Consider the case of Quentin Crisp, perhaps the preeminent dandy (not to be conflated necessarily with the fact that he was gay) of the late twentieth century. Alan Sinfield notes, "Crisp . . . says . . . that people such as he 'must, with every breath they draw, with every step they take, demonstrate that they are feminine.' Crisp is never not out: continually he is propositioned, harassed, and beaten, on sight, by total strangers; employers and the army reject him out of hand" (268). Dandified displays like Crisp's—because of their essential performativity—are dangerous precisely because they implicate any and all roles as adaptable, elastic. And even in our purportedly permissive age, such displays continue to goad some people to beat other people up.

As Hell grew closer to becoming a full-time musician with the advent of The Neon Boys around 1972 and 1973, and particularly when he got closest to becoming a relatively well-known rock 'n' roll figure in the mid to late 1970s, Baudelaire and Rimbaud and Lautréamont were hovering in the background. These poets were invoked fairly often by the music press as it attempted to define a new movement in music that seemed equal parts abjection and erudition. A 1977 article in the British music magazine *Sounds* characterized journalists' attempts to make sense of this apparent breaching of the high/low divide:

But over in NY, NY, people are not ashamed to use the word ART. Richard Hell is an ARTIST, or, more specifically, a poet, from an academic/artistic background. I know that for sure, because I actually met Richard's mother at the Village Gate gigs. She's a professor (I think) of English Literature at a university in Kentucky who looks a lot more like a tres chic elder sister than a mum. . . .

The state of Richard's consciousness as reflected in his room proves that Richard functions on more levels than rock and roll. His heroes are French poets and novelists, Baudelaire, Lautreamont's 'Maldoror' Rimbaud and Huysmans.

(25, 26)

Music journalist Lester Bangs on the one hand wanted to liberate Hell from anything approaching a debt to symbolist aesthetics and, on the other, made sure to point out how Hell's lyrics in the song "Down at the Rock & Roll Club" echoed Baudelaire's decadent narcissism: "Hell has found solace in late 19th Century French Symbolist poets, in fact he fancies them his muses or mentors. But, though I fantasize on them, too, at length, I must say no, because Lautréamont or even Baudelaire would be incapable of following up 'Rip off my shirt / Watch the mirror and flirt' (Baudelairean, admittedly) with 'Scotch and soda!'" (9).

This rather ambivalent play between poetry and punk—accepting, even inviting links to be made between relatively obscure lyric practice and punk rock while wanting to cleanse punk of any associations with high culture—was very much in evidence in Hell's own poetry published in *Genesis : Grasp*. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see in his early works an attempt to forge a new voice that would take in influences as diverse as Baudelaire, James Joyce, Artaud, Rimbaud, and Gerard Manley Hopkins in the service of projecting a huffy, angry, funny speaker—one that would find successful expression in the music to come.

Hell's "Hot Ice, Seed Water, Letterfwhesh," included in *Genesis : Grasp* 1.3, shows a young writer practically wrestling with influence as he remains determined to develop a provocative, sexualized persona:

(Tasty Ratpich Song)

Broken (ice) eyes water. When
Your eyes break, then I come
In! Through eyes flow.

Sweet salt? Hot ice? Made love?
Vat, sweet slime, co-heat
Lode! Slick tongues in

Venting wetterflesh. **Stiff** tongue
In toothless mouth (still young)
Sweet salt: comes!

(34)

Hell's use of idioglossia ("letterfwesh," "ratpich," and "wetterflesh") suggests the influence of James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, a book that agitated violently against the kinds of epistemological imperatives that drove so many of the works we associate with high modernism (Ezra Pound's *The Cantos*, T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*) in favor of linguistic play and diffuseness, uncertainty and artifice. As Randall Stevenson has put it, "In *Finnegans Wake*, the breach between word and world is no longer a matter of doubt but of assumption" (196). Hell's Joycean wordplay here is an early indication of the nascent punk's understanding of neologisms as part of an overall strategy—akin to the glam-rock star's and dandy's wardrobes—to confront readers with the artificiality of language and, by extension, the failure of language transparently to represent "reality" or "truth." The rules of syntax and grammar, the social consensus on the relationship between signifier and signified, are in poems like "Hot Ice" given a rude shove through the disruptive practice of an allusively Joycean idiosyncratic language.

I am reading this poem as a kind of autobiography of the poet's developing reading habits and understanding of what constitutes literary heritage.⁹ A vibrant little magazine often serves as a record of the editors' increasing sense of identity based on shared aesthetics and growing social networks. This identity is built up in part by the editors' contacting those authors they are reading and asking them to send in poems. As Hell describes it, the process of editing *Genesis : Grasp* was "like growing up in public!" (Personal interview). That's how literary community is formed. For example, the use of the almost homophonic word pair "ice" and "eyes" shows a marked apprecia-

9. Hell's journals from the period of the composition of "Hot Ice" reveal that Hell was reading Gerard Manley Hopkins and Robert Creeley's book *Pieces* carefully. I would suggest that Hopkins's "sprung rhythm" and Creeley's use of enjambment inform the overall structure of "Hot Ice."

tion for the kinds of poetic practices manifesting the materiality of language that, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, was coming increasingly to the fore in the work of poets like Aram Saroyan, Clark Coolidge, and Bruce Andrews. That Hell would go on in subsequent issues to publish poets like Coolidge and Andrews, marking a radical, experimental break with the rather standard lyric practices of earlier issues, emphasizes how his increasing knowledge of postmodern poetry was beginning to have an effect on his own output, helping him “grow up,” as it were.

Correspondence from Hell to Coolidge in early 1970 shows the young poet increasingly committed to a linguistically and syntactically disruptive poetics which he linked to an anarchist politics and pop sensibility. Poetry, as Hell put it to Coolidge, is “finally the place where the only law is ‘ACCEPT NO LAWS’” (Letter to Clark Coolidge, 30 Jan. 1970). Soon after that particular revelation, Hell began sending Coolidge examples from his own work, though in this case it was work that Hell had written under the pseudonym “Ernie Stomach,” a character who, as Hell pointed out to Coolidge, was committed to transforming consciousness itself via language:

Here’s an old revelation of Ernie Stomach’s for a snack

soap opera
so a pop era

After that he spent—in fact occasionally still spends—days looking for the key phrase that could prophesize various looks in the next few years. He’s convinced that words given the proper care could/can do absolutely anything from permanently alter one’s consciousness—throw you into fits of ecstasy—to accurately and precisely predict a specific future. I’m sure you’re onto these things—like your friends’ description of you as an anarchist I mean alchemist, depends on how you look at it

(Letter to Clark Coolidge, 11 Feb. 1970).

Moving firmly away from a model of writing as emanating out of a stable, specific subject-position, Hell here links a persona-based writing project with a quasi-mystical, quasi-political agenda that half-jokingly calls for an overthrow of order via a disassembling of normative signifying practices. Making use of puns and homonyms, Hell—through Ernie Stomach—shows how easy it is to transform “reality” by redistributing letters on

a page. The *Sturm und Drang* of a soap opera is manipulated into a casual “pop” era: cheesy depth and despair bleed into off-handedness and surface cool. Such alchemical transformation contains within it an “anarchist” effect, one that firmly places these kinds of language games in the service of a vibrant anti-authoritarianism.

Given Hell’s earlier, relatively conventional poems, we should think about poems like his “Hot Ice” alongside Coolidge’s poem “Simmer,” which Hell published in *Genesis : Grasp* 1.4. “Simmer,” beginning with the kinds of homonyms and Joycean word games that we find in “Hot Ice,” inadvertently shows how Hell was expanding his reading practices and trying on different styles to see what fit:

picture ethic pithic head blanch O’s balade entrench hifty
 dump the
 or coil ore grabs sleek dents match-matic
 bubble you
 clags mump if it limes gork crab stem beens all or
 rod house bee have
 smithic bents slab or gel rose encleeps
 (24)

Coolidge’s writing—understood simultaneously as Coolidge’s poem, as a sign of Hell’s shifting editorial tastes, and as a partial model for Hell’s developing experimental style—augurs Hell’s increasing disaffiliation from earlier influences that resulted in less than stellar lyric poems published in the first two issues of *Genesis : Grasp*. As Tom Orange puts it in his essay on Coolidge’s early poetry, the arrangement of words in texts like “Simmer”

involves the placement of materials in space (in the case of writing, verbal materials in the space of the page) such that energies are released and the materials act upon one another. It is essentially a juxtapositional art and can arise from cut-up, chance procedures or collage techniques, though it is not exclusive to any of these. . . .

Density is thus largely a function of word stock and reflects at this stage in Coolidge’s work an affinity for monosyllabic words, particularly those that couple long vowels or diphthongs with consonant blends. But whereas other words that fit these phonic parameters might carry various associations with them (say, “hate,” “dream,” or “love”), Coolidge’s

words are quite intractable: what they resist is easy assimilation to any semantic fields other than their own.

Read against the background story of Hell's gradual conversion from, in his words, "a complete hayseed" (Personal interview) to poetry editor to punk legend, we can read the resistance to "easy assimilation to any semantic fields other than their own" as informing Hell's increasing sense of alienation from American consensus culture and as a method for him to avoid playing by majority rules. Inspired by Marcel Duchamp's Dada antics, William S. Burroughs's cut-ups, John Cage's chance-determined musical compositions, the independence between movement and sound in Merce Cunningham's choreography, and similar works, a text like "Simmer" was part of a trend in North American alternative poetic practice in the 1960s and early 1970s to challenge the status of a poem as a consumable object amenable to paraphrase. Key New York school-affiliated texts like Frank O'Hara's "Second Avenue," much of the work in John Ashbery's book *The Tennis Court Oath*, Kenneth Koch's "When the Sun Tries to Go On," Ted Berrigan's collage sonnets, and Jackson Mac Low's aleatory texts were extended by poets like Coolidge into ever more dissident poetic and linguistic positions. As Orange notes, "Coolidge's concentration on sound, relationality, and denotative resistances is . . . already implicit in Berrigan and Koch; Coolidge has simply foregrounded those qualities and carried them to the next logical step." What I want to argue here is that Hell took these "qualities" to an entirely new place, casting off the aura of impenetrability and micro-community associated with such texts while holding on to and extending the politics of antireferentiality and fracture into the populist space of punk performance.

Using poetry to project an awkward, humorously grouchy sexuality was one of the ways Hell moved toward a more popular aesthetic. "Hot Ice" is but one instance of a poem built as a series of somewhat heavy-handed metaphors that evoke semen, as the enjambed lines work all the harder to evoke a kind of rough back-and-forth or pistoning action suggestive of sexual intercourse. Hell emphasizes his sexual life in a number of early poems, drawing special attention to images of sperm, ejacula-

tion, jerking off, and the like. In *Genesis : Grasp* 1.3, for example, he writes in an untitled poem, "Set forth in myself for the skin of / The universe, galaxy to phallus I / Travel my infinite vein" (33). In *Genesis : Grasp* 1.4 (1970), he returns to the theme in his poem "It" (later included in Hell's volume *Hot and Cold* [21]): "I continue manipulating / My self. / It's very demanding. That's why masturbators / Also sleep a lot" (15). Uncollected poems in Hell's archives from this period show a poet absorbed in such details: "I pull this girl to me from behind when I see the hair / drip between her legs one hand on each breast my cock / presses the length between her buttocks / she's married to 40 people or so and so am I as / incest is life, drenched with the / membrain [sic] what moves and is warm is mutant. / Is warm is good, is vitamins, / sperm mixed with thick salty blood and a little shit: / fuel shelter food and perfume" ("Rimbaud Knew"). That these works progress from lyric effusions exhibiting the relatively conservative influences of Hopkins and Dylan Thomas to the more and more aggressive, literal, and cynical depictions of modern love that we see in a poem like "It," replete with profanity and surrealist inflected depictions of sex, suggests there is an arc from Hell's earlier love poetry to his key punk song "Love Comes in Spurts," versions of which were recorded as early as 1973.¹⁰

True, "Love Comes in Spurts" is a fairly direct, uncomplicated, and funny song emphasizing how emotion is often bred and extinguished out of an easily expended lust: "Cuz love comes in spurts / in dangerous flirts / and it murders your heart—They didn't tell you that part / *Love comes in spurts*" (*Hot and Cold* 146). That said, the song is representative of how Hell depicts love in his lyric practice in the final issues of *Genesis : Grasp* and subsequent publications. With the advent of bands including the Neon Boys, Television, and Richard Hell & the Voidoids, Hell increasingly appropriated "avant-garde" techniques learned from poetry for his pop lyrics and stage role. "Love Comes in Spurts" seems very much of a piece with Hell's artistic development. For

10. An early version of "Love Comes in Spurts" that Hell performed in his and Tom Verlaine's *The Neon Boys* is included in the CD *Spurts: The Richard Hell Story*.

Hell, poetry had always had an antiestablishment, iconoclastic sheen. Hell recalls: "When I decided at 16 that I wanted to drop out of school, the way that I described it to myself was . . . what my ambition and intention was . . . was to be a poet. To me what represented a poet was Dylan Thomas. It was basically just about living by your wits, being drunk, and being thought of as sexy. Being outside of straight society" (Personal interview). These comments may clarify how a young poet became a punk legend with an autodidact, cynical, funny, and aggressive persona.

In 1971, Hell published the final volume of the *Genesis : Grasp* project. This issue most closely approached the kind of aesthetic evenness that the young poet valued so much during his tenure at Gotham Book Mart. Hell remembers the issue with something approaching healthy pride: "By the last issue I still felt like . . . my co-editor David Gianinni had a little bit of influence on that one and we had just completely diverged in our ideas by then . . . but apart from that I really. . . I'm happy with the last issue . . . the magazine was ready to move on" (Personal interview). The cover featured a triptych of three faces. On the upper far left was a young Rimbaud, to his right was Antonin Artaud, and in the bottom left corner was "Theresa Stern," a person who, at first glance, appeared to be either a very rough-living, gaudy woman or a member of the New York Dolls. In fact, "Theresa" was a composite shot of Tom Miller/Verlaine and Richard Meyers/Hell, with liberal doses of makeup. Poems in the issue included work by Andrei Codrescu, Simon Schuchat, Bruce Andrews, Toby Sonneman, Richard Meyers, Ernie Stomach, Albert Goldbarth, Patty Machine (a pseudonym for Patty Oldenburg, Hell's partner at the time), Tom Miller/Verlaine, Clark Coolidge, and Yuki Hartman.

While space limitations keep me from considering in full the social text created by this constellation of writers, we should at least look back on Bruce Andrews in 1971 as he occupied *Genesis : Grasp* 1.5/6.¹¹ Andrews would end up making much of the

11. Hell saw Coolidge and Andrews as very much a part of a new "movement" that he, as a publisher, could help create by making the necessary introductions. As he wrote to Coolidge in 1970, "By the way, if you do have any remaining interest in a 'Movement'

“punk” aesthetic of the seventies and eighties in books such as *Give Em Enough Rope* (1987), which was probably titled after The Clash’s eponymous album. As Juliana Spahr points out in her discussion of *Give Em Enough Rope*:

The work in this collection is decisively anti-poetic and avoids any hint of lyricism. It is built around disjunction. The work has an uncensored (some would say unedited) quality. Appearing side by side is intellectual and often politically inflected language (“Intentionally leaderless”; “rewriting the body”; “Camera obscura”), accusations, insults, challenges (“Don t give a shit what you think”), and punk lyrics (throughout this piece are references to groups like the Pop Group (“How long do we tolerate mass murder” 144), Richard Hell and the Voidoids (“blank generation” 145), the Tubes and Nina Hagen (“white huskies on dope” 147), Velvet Underground (“we don t perform Heroin anymore” 153), Joy Division (“Joy division” 156; “love will tear us” 161), the Buzzcocks (“orgas-maddict” 157), Teenage Jesus and the Jerks (“freud in flop” 161), the Sex Pistols (“NO FUTURE” 166), and the Clash (“radio free Europe” 166)). Often racial or sexual slurs are mixed in.

Bruce Andrews’s poem “5th Collaboration,” included in the final issue of *Genesis : Grasp*, while lacking some of the qualities that Spahr identifies, does nevertheless raise some interesting questions regarding who appropriates what in terms of the purported struggle between “high” and “low” culture that defines our ever-expanding (or circular) arguments about what precisely constitutes postmodernism:

1. Two old priests pristinely traipse the Alabama cup
2. The pale apricot rosebud savors
the poetry of Robert Lowell
3. leaves in a basket with a broke bottom
4. Old Savannah highway

and would like to be in touch with someone who it looks like has interests related to yours, a guy named Bruce Andrews (maybe you already know of him) recently sent some works (we’re printing two) with a note asking if we knew of any other poets or magazines who might be interested in his work” (Letter 11 Feb.).

5. black thorn crystal

6. San Pedro

(15)

Now, what makes this work a “poem”? And why call it “5th Collaboration” if readers are unaware of the people Andrews is collaborating with? Why is there a marked resistance to lyric evident in the very form of this work, composed as it is of sentence fragments, non sequiturs, and lightly disguised literary politics that would relegate an establishment poet like Robert Lowell to the realm of effete farce? Is the reference to “San Pedro” an invitation to “in the know” readers to associate this fragmented work with the hallucinatory effects of the San Pedro cactus, or is the place name merely a random gesture? Once again, we see an oppositional poetics in place that resists even the generic category “poem” to which the work’s place in *Genesis*: *Grasp* point.

In a letter dated February 8, 1971, Hell wrote to Andrews, “We accept for our next issue (#5–6) your 5th Collaboration and “Strindour . . .” Looks like you’re doing some interesting stuff—too bad we can’t take more or even see more right now, but we’re overloaded with material for this coming issue.” Andrews took this letter as an invitation to begin a series of back-and-forth missives. A letter from Hell to Andrews just four days after the note announcing that “5th Collaboration” was accepted shows Hell letting Andrews know the extent to which new aesthetic positions were taking shape:

Current tentative plan—BLAK & WITE Mag, not only a “non”—“linear” as they say but—. If you know what I mean.—. BLAK & WITE. Tentative in sense that I want some enthusiasm from prospective contributors. Are you one? Thin issues out fast of the ink between site since black is so visible on white and blood. What kind of explainer am I? Not good that’s why I’ll stick to paper that reveals the nerve connected to the hipbone etc. Um

Met A. Saroyan up there yet?

Her’s some a [*sic*] what I’m up to (one per page)

wino
street
dirt
heat
dirt
China

thanks for the blood, man

I lay down
and really lay into
soft ribbed air
such big white inches

Am printing the old time mag. Gotta do it fast because I want to forget about it. Another “beautiful” thing—aggh.

Well if any of this conveys anything to you send me some apt wrk & then in response further communication & maybe you’ll know of others. I’m also interested in “purely” visual work if intended for the page. In other words I want each page in the mag to be as direct as possible. I don’t want words from the imagination or intellect. I want them from the muscled energy of a being and/or more particularly from the page. I want to turn people on.

Hell and Andrews met and corresponded, not coincidentally, at a time when Hell was becoming increasingly exasperated not just with conventional lyric poetry but with poetry in general. Tired of producing the kinds of journals typical of the period—be they establishment organs or low-fi, coterie, experimental mimeographed sheets—Hell now began to develop an aesthetic that demanded a new genre entirely. Hostile toward the way “beautiful” can so easily become synonymous with product, emphasizing speed and instantaneity over measured reflection, valuing the visual over the verbal, and aching to communicate not with solitary readers but with a crowd, Richard Meyers the poet was teetering on the edge of becoming Richard Hell the punk rock icon.

In fact, the poems of “Richard Meyers” included in the final issue of *Genesis : Grasp* included the kind of imagery and language we associate with many of Hell’s best-known songs. In an untitled poem, for example, Hell’s Felliniesque carny aesthetic comes to the fore:

The cattle are barking
 because it is dark. Why, here’s
 one at my fourth floor window. Come in,
 old flame, you are my buddy. Wrap your
 flanks around me. Without looking
 I can distinguish against my cheeks
 the brown patch from the white one each
 made out of hairs out of doors
 in the vinyl grass-black
 heat of the streets, many years ago.
 Sit down, rest that big flesh
 fig against the floor. I rise to shut the window
 and looking out resolve never to turn back.
 Then she told me why the pinhead couldn’t stay at the party.

(25; *Hot and Cold* 11)

This work is obviously a long way from the modernist pastiche of “Hot Ice.” A surrealist approach—replete with barking cows, non sequiturs, and spooky pinheads—is here charmingly domesticated through its articulation in a space evocative of a New York City apartment. The portentousness of Hell’s language in the earlier work seems to have been left behind for a much more lighthearted, if vaguely aggressive diction that at times verges on a twisted cuddliness. These qualities are evident in much of Hell’s published and unpublished work from the early 1970s. An untitled poem written initially for Hell’s and Tom Verlaine’s *Wanna Go Out?* draws once again on the figure of the pinhead in order to promote an aura of surreality, ugliness, and transgression: “destitute Puerto Ricans and me and the Puerto Ricans don’t / want to have anything to do with me! / Actually I forgot about the pinheads and mongoloids / but I could never fuck either. / I’m beginning to understand mystical chastity” (Richard Hell Papers). These kinds of poems are close in spirit to much of Hell’s lyric output. With its homegrown sur-

realism, its references to “pinheads” (who make an appearance not just in Hell’s song “You Gotta Lose” but in the Ramones’ classic song “Pinhead”), and its vaguely hostile relationship to other people, this poem presages many of Richard Hell’s more ambitious lyrics. The opening stanzas of “You Gotta Lose,” for example, follow much the same path, albeit tamed by rhyme: “I hope I don’t seem immodest when I tell you that my my / mother was a pinhead and my father was a fly. / That’s why I love you darling with a love that’s so unique: / Your glistenin wings they complement your head’s exquisite peak. // *They all died by coin toss. / Love’s a form of memory loss. / I can’t forget that triple cross . . . // You gotta lose, you gotta lose*” (*Hot and Cold* 143). This agglomeration of pinheads, sexual frustration, and surrealism, created during a period of Hell’s life that found him increasingly disenchanted with the limited audience attentive to poetry, ultimately characterized many of his contributions to rock ‘n’ roll.

The great transitional moments for Hell prior to the formation of the bands the Neon Boys and Television were the publication and subsequent abandonment of the *Genesis : Grasp* project; a last-ditch attempt to market poetry for a mass audience through a new publishing imprint, Dot Books; and the creation with Tom Miller/Verlaine of the persona Theresa Stern. A letter (August 16, 1972) from Hell to poet, filmmaker, and publisher Charlie Plymell announcing the formation of Dot Books looks, in hindsight, like a swan-song to poetry:

To me “*Genesis : Grasp*” is like the archetypal, back-turned, weepy, self-defeating, poor but noble little literary magazine. Who cares? Publishing a mag like that is like writing off the world. It’s like committing suicide. It says oh I’m beautiful but it’s no use, goodbye goodbye! It’s not tough enough. I don’t know . . . it aint all that bad—but it’s nothing compared to what can be done. It’s like the poets give up before they start in terms of making a dent in people’s consciousness. Whereas the Beatles for instance changed the world—made people happy and shook em up. I think poets can do the same thing. That’s where Dot Books is going to be aimed. It’ll be a series of paperbacks in the format of mass market drug-store ups. Same size, flashy glossy covers—blurbs, exclamation points, code numbers, pulpy paper inside—everything as closely as I can approximate it with incredibly less money than Dell, or Fawcett or Bantam. But

the first one is being printed now and it really makes it—hottest looking book since *The Godfather* with poems in it like these two (on facing pages)

hands up

thighs

your skirt

on my neck

warm wet

I suck

pants

the clit

by Andrew Wylie. So that's what I'm up to.

What Hell was to discover, of course, was that poets could not “do the same thing” as the Beatles. Poets could not reach a mass audience; they could not materially threaten consensus culture through shock tactics like Wylie’s antipoetry in evidence here. (Hell had additional books by himself, Verlaine, and Patti Smith ready for publication by Dot Books, but these projects did not materialize, as he left poetry for music.) In a letter to Bruce Andrews (July 17, 1972) relating to the formation of Dot Books, Hell made his plans clear regarding his relationship to poetry and publishing: “It’s an experiment, the whole thing. I’m gonna see if I can make money in this racket. If this doesn’t, something’s wrong that I can’t fix, and I’ll skip publishing for good. I’ve been thru the poor but beautiful bag & *that* sure don’t make it.” As poetry’s lack of commercial and popular appeal became ever clearer to him, Hell’s response was to work toward a much more exciting option—rock ‘n’ roll.

That desire for a larger audience, combined with Hell’s continuing experiments in writing practices typical of the poets he loved, resulted in the composition of the song “Blank Generation,” Richard Hell’s most celebrated work and arguably *the* American punk anthem. Before we consider the verses of the song, we should read the famous chorus as it was recorded in Richard Hell & the Voidoid’s LP *Blank Generation* in 1977. Sung in a voice that is part whine, part howl, part snotty assertion,

Richard Hell proclaims, "I belong to the blank generation and." And it stops there, for a moment, on the "and." The chorus continues in this oddly disruptive way, each line refusing—through the violence of enjambment, the kind of practice Hell first experimented with in poems like "Hot Ice"—to be contained. These lines aren't consumable; this is no sing-along. The company implicit in the very word "chorus" is not welcome here. This unsociability is sustained throughout the four lines. "I belong to the blank generation and" is followed by "I can take it or leave it each time well" (the "well" stretched just a touch, aurally italicized, posed as a challenge, *wehllll*), which in turn is followed by "I belong to the _____ generation but," the word "blank" itself removed from the equation, replaced with its own omission, a materialization of itself as absence. Then, finally, the chorus grinds to a halt with the flippant and entirely ambiguous "but I can take it or leave it each time" ("Blank Generation"). Even in the context of Richard Hell's own New York scene—one that found any number of important proto-punk bands like the New York Dolls and the Dictators assaulting the bloated, pretentious arena rock that was increasingly dominating the airwaves¹²—the chorus of "Blank Generation" employs a number of sophisticated techniques that have a literary impulse behind them, if by "literary" we mean such characteristics as enjambment and a style that values ambiguity over direct statement.

The song emanated from the collaborative spirit of late sixties and early seventies downtown poetry to which Hell was drawn. This scene found any number of magazines—including Ted Berigan's aforementioned *C* magazine, Lewis Warsh's and Anne Waldman's *Angel Hair*, Bernadette Mayer's and Vito Acconci's *0 to 9*, and the Poetry Project at St. Mark's Church's "house" jour-

12. The first issue of the journal *New York Rocker* positioned arena rock's penetration of the market as a disaster that essentially wiped out the dissident sensibility of mid-sixties "punk" one-hit wonders like Question Mark & the Mysterians and Blues Magoos—a sensibility reinvigorated by the scene then developing at CBGBs. In his article on the Ramones, for example, Brock Altane complained: "Supposedly, we're living in the 'liberated' seventies, right?? Well let's take a look at our 'liberated' record charts: Chicago, Olivia Newton John, John Denver, America, Seals and Crofts, Ohio Players, Neil Sedaka, Barry Manilow, K.C. & The Sunshine Band, Glen Campbell, Helen Reddy, and on and on and on."

nal, *The World*—publishing seemingly endless reams of collaborative, anonymously, or pseudonymously produced poetry that contested the idea of writing as “self”-expression as it challenged conventional understandings of the author as a stable, solitary subject. In light of this community-oriented literary culture, we should note that aspects of “Blank Generation”—which begins with the now-iconic stanza “I was saying lemme out of here before I was / even born. It’s such a gamble when you get a face. / It’s fascinatin’ to observe what the mirror does / but when I dine it’s for the wall that I set a place” (*Hot and Cold* 144)—were cultured initially in the pages of *Wanna Go Out?*, a small-press poetry book dreamed up, edited, and designed by Hell, who collaborated on the book’s poems with his then best friend, the Neon Boys and Television co-founder Tom (Miller) Verlaine under the single pseudonym “Theresa Stern.” As Hell recalls, “Theresa for me was definitely the big breakthrough . . . and that almost coincided with leaving poetry for music” (Personal interview).

The first line of Hell’s “Blank Generation” derives from material Hell wrote for the table of contents of *Wanna Go Out?* The book was issued in 1973 under the Dot Books imprint, a series in which Hell makes the announcement “OTHER BOOKS FROM THE BLANK GENERATION AVAILABLE FROM DOT” on the book’s verso pages. Hell explains:

You want to know what the origin of those lines [from “Blank Generation”] is? They have a really sneaky origin. . . . In this book you’ll see it’s the first time the phrase “Blank Generation” shows up. The table of contents is a poem itself. “Stars I was / Thinking now I’ve started a new game / How come no one / As I lounge in my parlor / And the cars wish they had some candy comes / To amplify my eardrums / When I look at the floor foreground / For the scissors on my wrists / And ponder upon that little cut / After all I wasn’t even born / When I first said lemme out of here / Marionette mon amour / My . . . oh / The light’s too dim in here / I’m getting nervous / But I promise / You stranger I’m tight and juicy.”

(Personal interview)

A number of poems in *Wanna Go Out?* evoke further the conflation of petulant punk attitude and lyric poem that I have been

discussing so far. The poem "To Amplify My Eardrums" suggests rock 'n' roll chaos in the lines "They came last night and amplified my eardrums. / It's to glee bay / (TERRIBLE TERRIBLE) / they want to take me away. / Well I don't belong here anyway. I'm the only rock band on earth who's the earth's hernia" (Stern 14). Phrases in other poems—for example, "Fuck this whole goddamn apartment" ("The light's too dim in here" [25]), "Of the cunt that was nailed to the cross" ("A promise that squirts" [31]), and "Close this book I scream and come look me up so we can fuck as long / as I don't have to talk" ("The stranger and the moon are good buddies" [32]) augur Hell's literate rage in his music's articulation of urban blight and provocative nihilism.

Who was this fictional Theresa Stern? As the introduction to *Wanna Go Out?* reads:

THERESA STERN was born on October 27, 1949, of a German Jewish father and a Puerto Rican mother in Hoboken, N.J., directly across the Hudson from New York City. She still lives there, alone, where all the poems in this book were written over a four month period in the summer and fall of 1971. She has since devoted that of her time not spent in flipping coins to composing a love story, *THIN SKIN*. It describes the murder, in ten chapters fired by Theresa, of her closest friend. *WANNA GO OUT?* is a question often asked on the streets around the cheaper bars in New York and Hoboken.

Stern was widely believed to be a real subject. In August 1976, John Holmstrom's *Punk* magazine advertised *Wanna Go Out?* (*Punk* 1.5) with the sarcastically worded phrase "Poetry? in Punk??" leading off a reproduction of a Stern poem followed by instructions to send five dollars to "R. Meyers." Letters to Meyers asking for more information and work from Stern show that many in the poetry community believed Stern to be some kind of *art brut* poet. Ron Silliman, who was publishing the proto-L = A = N = G = U = A = G = E poetry journal *Tottel's* at the time, wrote Hell in praise of Theresa: "Enclosed please find a check for \$0.95. please, send a copy of Theresa Stern's book *WANNA GO OUT?* right away. Darrell Gray has been turning people onto it out here & it certainly intrigues. . . . As I publish a newsletter of poetry, *Tottel's*, and am always involved in a variety of other publishing conspiracies out here, I'd be interested in obtaining

her address or in having this note passed on to her, so that she cld drop me a line, or whatever." In the fourth issue of *Punk* magazine, writer Mary Harron, who later directed films including *I Shot Andy Warhol* and *American Psycho*, conducted an interview with "Theresa Stern" by giving a set of questions to Hell, who then went on to write the answers. Harron pretended to have elicited the answers herself through a personal visit to "Theresa" in her purported home in Hoboken. In response to the question, "I'd like to start out by asking you about your literary influences and how and why you started writing," "Stern" responded, "I started writing because it was so easy. I saw all this writing being praised and I knew I could do better with a splitting headache on the subway at rush hour. Most poets are such bullshitters—they have so many vested interests, . . . whereas I have hardly any interests at all (laughter). As for influences—my favorite poet of the century is Breton. Infinitely passionate, profound and incorruptible and what's more he's the smartest guy I ever came across and his poetry doesn't make any sense" (15).

As this potted history of the origins of "Blank Generation" attests, the poetry scene in and around the Lower East Side, combined with Hell's developing reading habits, his work as a publisher, and his growing connection to poets like Clark Coolidge, Ron Silliman, Andrew Wylie, and Bruce Andrews, played a real part in the transformation of Richard Meyers into Richard Hell. True, we should be careful not to overstate the case, as Richard Hell, for example, may not have cared much for some proto-punk poets like the Fugs and was more connected to the scene at the Poetry Project in the 1980s and 1990s (through his curatorship of a reading series and his publication of *CUZ* Editions) than he was in the 1960s. And of course it was music that finally lured Hell away (if temporarily) from poetry and publishing. But poetry was never far from Hell's mind. Hell's notes written in one of punk chanteuse Patti Smith's 1974 journals show that the increasingly well-known punk rocker still had one foot firmly planted in the literary world:

I've gotta figure out something pleasurable to do with a pen on paper that I wouldn't want to see in print. Can always read the preceding pages

for inspiration. What could be better. Too bad she [Patti Smith] didn't throw in a few drawings. Maybe I'll write a book. Starting with title for next page.

PLEASE KILL ME

(Hell and Smith)

So even in June 1974, when Hell had already begun participating in the downtown music scene that would elevate him to myth—even when Hell had come up with the punk catchphrase “PLEASE KILL ME,” which was to be stenciled onto a T-shirt Television guitarist Richard Lloyd wore onstage—he could not quite disassociate himself from poetry altogether. “Maybe I’ll write a book” he wrote, during the period in which his and Tom Verlaine’s band Television was already performing live at CBGB’s and other downtown venues. Indeed, in an entry dated December 17, Hell wrote in Smith’s journal, “start passionate mimeoed fanzine of (French) Symbolist Poetry.” Looking back at Richard Hell, it behooves us to at least question why such an artist found a model for life and music in poetry and poetics, and to further examine how New York City’s Lower East Side in the 1960s and 1970s generated a vibrant, outlaw, and angry lyric culture that informed and interacted with the burgeoning Blank Generation.

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